

***Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica III:***  
**Epimachos of Attiri: a Warrior Saint of Late Christian Nubia**

[*Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica III:*  
Epímaco de Attiri: un santo guerrero de la Antigua Nubia cristiana]

**Alexandros TSAKOS**  
Humboldt University (Berlin)  
atsakos@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The third paper of this series shifts focus to a special category of artistic and epigraphic production from the kingdoms of Medieval Nubia, namely the wooden plaques depicting a small variety of figures of the Christian faith. It particularly discusses one of these objects, found at a site called Attiri, which depicts a horseman with his mount spearing a trodden figure. The focal point of this paper is the inscription in the particular language of the Nubians of the Late Christian period that was carved on the back of that object and identifies the represented figure with Saint Epimachos.

**Resumen:** El tercer artículo de esta serie cambia la atención a una categoría de la producción artística y epigráfica de los reinos de la Nubia medieval, concretamente a las placas de madera que representan una pequeña variedad de figuras de la fe cristiana. Estudia, particularmente, uno de estos objetos, encontrado en un lugar llamado Attiri, que representa a un jinete con su montura alanceando a una figura hollada. El punto central de este artículo es la inscripción, en la lengua particular de los nubios del periodo cristiano tardío, que fue labrada en la parte trasera de ese objeto y que identifica a la figura representada con san Epímaco.

**Palabras clave:** Sudán. Nubia. Epigrafía. Santos. Epímaco.

**Key words:** Sudan. Nubia. Epigraphics. Saints. Epimachos.



### Introduction

Half a century ago, UNESCO launched an international campaign for the salvage of the cultural heritage of (Lower) Nubia, the area stretching between the First Cataract and the Batn el-Hajar upstream from the Second Cataract of the Nile, due to the construction of the Aswan High Dam.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the 1960s, the huge construction submerged almost entirely this stretch of the Nile Valley under the waters of Lake Nasser/Nubia.<sup>2</sup>

The archaeological work conducted there between 1960 and 1968 must be considered the largest salvage campaign ever.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Lower Nubia became one of the archaeologically most thoroughly investigated areas of the world. The monuments of the Egyptian and Sudanese past gained international attention, and some of them were indeed great sensations for both the academic world and the general public.

If the moving of Ramses II's rock-cut temple at Abu Simbel was the most pronounced representative in this era of heroic archaeology, then discovering the treasures of the Medieval Kingdom of Christian Nobadia was the motor for the series of academic meetings that created the International Society for Nubian Studies.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Nubian population affected by the dam construction remained somehow on the backstage of all sorts of attention, despite some brilliant exceptions.<sup>5</sup>

On the backstage of academic attention remained also a lot of the surveyed and/or excavated sites that have not been studied and/or published

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Publication of Proceedings of 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary since the Campaign, "Lower Nubia: Revisiting the Past, Envisaging the Future" (in preparation).

<sup>2</sup> The southernmost stretches of the Batn el-Hajar is the only part north of the Dal Cataract that has not been affected.

<sup>3</sup> W.Y. ADAMS, "A century of archaeological salvage, 1907-2007", *Sudan & Nubia* 11 (2007), p. 48.

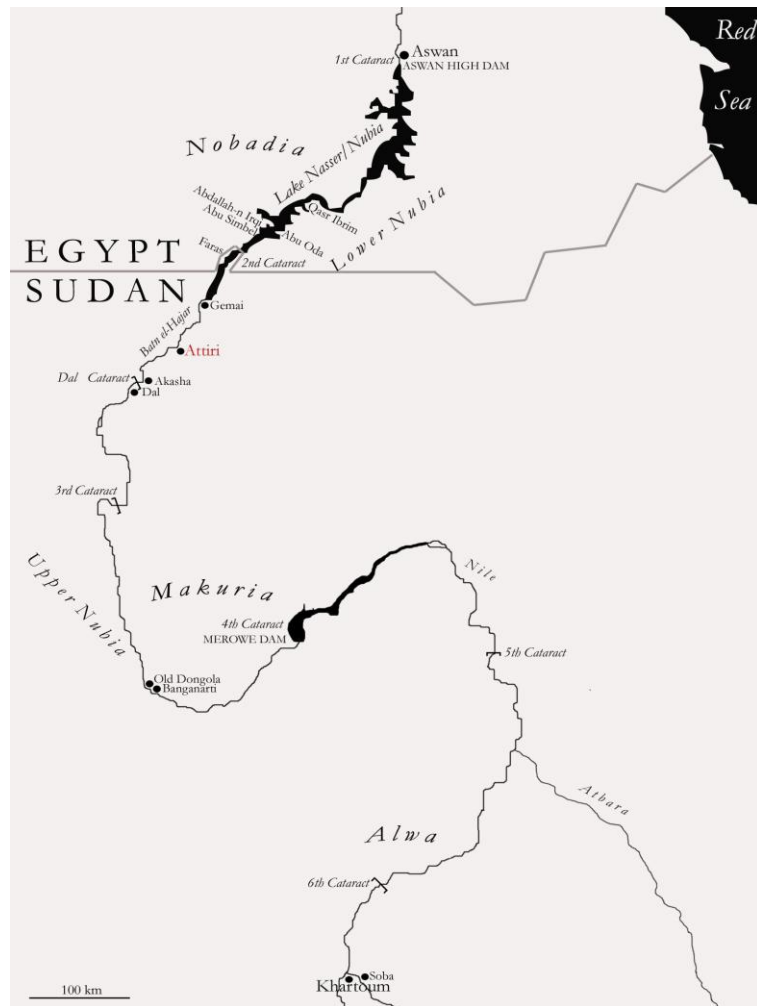
<sup>4</sup> E. DINKLER (ed.), *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens in christlicher Zeit: Ergebnisse und Probleme auf Grund der jüngsten Ausgrabungen* (Recklinghausen, 1970), pp. 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Hassan DAFALLA, *The Nubian Exodus* (Uppsala & New York: Universe Books, 1975).

until this day. For some of them, it is even difficult to define the character, although many objects collected during fieldwork were considered worthy of being displayed in museum exhibitions around the world.

A characteristic example is the collection of impressive basketry products as well as figurines carved on wooden plaques found in a building on a tiny rocky island opposite the locality known under the name of Attiri. In the site register of the Sudan Archaeological Map system, this island bears the register number 16-J-6, and the wooden plaques have the find numbers 45 to 49.

These objects are stored and/or exhibited in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum (SNM), where is also kept the documentation of the fieldwork conducted by the Sudan Antiquities Service during the UNESCO campaign (SAS-UNESCO archive). A copy of that documentation is in the possession of David Edwards, at the University of Leicester, England.



Map prepared by Henriette Hafsaas-Tsakos

**The sites at Attiri<sup>6</sup>**

Arkell was the first to mention a site on an island opposite Attiri back in 1950.<sup>7</sup> He also published an overview photo from a boat trip passing west (?) of the site, in his *History of Sudan*.<sup>8</sup> In both cases he described the mud-brick building on the top of the island as a church, but it is not certain that he made the difficult crossing to the island. A reconnaissance journey on horseback by Chittick in January 1955 did not produce any further information, apart from the opinion that (from the banks of the mainland again?) the site “looks well worthy of investigation”.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the sites of the area around Attiri had to wait for the systematic surveys and selective excavations of the archaeologists participating in the UNESCO campaigns. Attiri fell under the jurisdiction of the Sudan Antiquities Service, and the work was conducted under the direction of A.J. Mills. In his account of the 1963-1964 reconnaissance survey, he devoted half a page to listing the principal sites of the locality.<sup>10</sup> Site 16-J-6 was identified as a Christian village covering the whole island of Attiri. Mills nuanced the identification by Arkell and stated that in that village there were “a number of buildings including a small chapel in a fair state of preservation”.

In the SNM registers, the objects under discussion are indicated as having come to the museum in 1966, following a season of excavations, the records of which are in the largely unpublished archives of the UNESCO-Sudan Antiquities Service survey of the Gemai-Dal region. These in fact suggest that the term “village” is hardly applicable to the case of site 16-J-6. According to the field records of Mills’ 1964 excavations (AJM III: 42-

---

<sup>6</sup> This part of the paper has profited on many levels from contacts with David Edwards.

<sup>7</sup> A. ARKELL, “Varia Sudanica”, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 36 (1950), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> A. ARKELL, *A History of the Sudan from the Earliest Times to 1821* (London, 1961), plate 21.

<sup>9</sup> H.N. CHITTICK, “Antiquities of the Batn el Hajjar”, *Kush* V (1957), p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> A.J. MILLS, “The Reconnaissance Survey from Gemai to Dal: A Preliminary Report for 1963-64”, *Kush* XIII (1965), pp. 6-7.

43; AJM IX: 56-85), the whole known archaeology consists of ca. seven buildings. House no. VI, occupying the highest ground on the island, is the building that is of interest here, since it was in chamber no. 6 of the house where the wooden plaques under discussion were found.

In the adjacent chamber no. 8, mural paintings in a bad state of preservation were located, and those led Mills to the suggestion that this was a chapel. The field notes record the presence of a range of pottery wares but with only small quantities of medieval Nubian products, elsewhere referred to by W.Y. Adams (who seems to have visited the site in February 1966) as “very few Late I Christian sherds” (file WYA XII: 10), otherwise dominated by post-medieval, handmade wares (Edwards: pers. comm.). As for the whole site, Adams suggested that “there had been a Late Christian monastic colony on the island”, but on the basis of the architectural remains at the site, the main period of activity seems to have been the post-Medieval centuries.<sup>11</sup>

### **The wooden plaques of Nubia**

Among the finds from Attiri, special attention is drawn to the five aforementioned wooden plaques. Two of the carvings depict the figure of Christ, two represent an angel, and one a warrior standing next to his horse and spearing a lying figure over which he also holds his sword. W. Godlewski has already published the two plaques depicting angels.<sup>12</sup> He identifies them as original iconographic combinations of the Archangel Michael and the Four Living Creatures.

This originality is, according to Godlewski, both conceptual and artistic. This belief later led the same scholar to suggest that these wooden plaques

---

<sup>11</sup> W.Y. ADAMS, “Islamic Archaeology in Nubia: An Introductory Survey”, in T. HÄGG (ed.), *Nubian Culture Past and Present* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1987), pp. 327-361 & note from SAS-UNESCO archive.

<sup>12</sup> W. GODLEWSKI, “The Nubian Seraphim”, in P.O. SCHOLZ and R. STEMPEL, *Nubia et Oriens Christianus. Festschrift für C. Detlef G. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag* (Köln, 1988), pp. 367-371.

are authentic Nubian creations.<sup>13</sup> There has been no objection raised against this suggestion, and the idea expressed by late Fr. Giovanni Vantini<sup>14</sup> that the wooden plaque depicting the warrior is evidence of Crusaders' influence upon Nubia has long been abandoned.<sup>15</sup>

Godlewski also suggested that these plaques were worn as pectorals. This suggestion was based on the one hand on the holes for suspension of the studied objects and on the other hand in the discovery in a grave at Qasr Ibrim of such a wooden plaque "lying across the face of an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century burial".<sup>16</sup> There is at least one more such object found at Qasr Ibrim<sup>17</sup> and one at Old Dongola.<sup>18</sup>

However, not all eight Nubian finds were necessarily used as pectorals. The best evidence of a different use are the rest of the wooden plaques from Attiri: both the ones with the figure of Christ and that with the representation of a warrior have a projecting stripe of wood on their back

<sup>13</sup> W. GODLEWSKI, "Christian Nubia – after the Nubian Campaign", *Cahier de Recherches de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille* 17/1 (1994), p. 272.

<sup>14</sup> G. VANTINI, *Christianity in the Sudan* (Bologna, 1981), pp. 185-186.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. S. WENIG, *Africa in Antiquity vol. II: The Exhibition* (New York, 1978), p. 324; W. GODLEWSKI, "The Nubian Seraphim", in P.O. SCHOLZ and R. STEMPEL, *Nubia et Oriens Christianus*, pp. 367-371; P.L. SHINNIE, "Christian Nubia and the Crusades" *Nubica* I/II, (1990), p. 605 and note 1; W. GODLEWSKI, "Christian Nubia – after the Nubian Campaign", *Cahier de Recherches de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille* 17/1 (1994), p. 272.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. J. PLUMLEY, "Qasr Ibrim 1966", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 52 (1966), p. 11 & Pl. VI, 4; J. PLUMLEY, "Some Examples of Christian Nubian Art from the Excavations at Qasr Ibrim", in E. DINKLER, *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens*, p. 133, fig. 81; W.Y. ADAMS & N. ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period* (London, 2010), pp. 195 & 199, fig. 51 & Pl. 38a & 38c.

<sup>17</sup> J. TURNER, *Egypt and Nubia* (London: British Museum Press, 1991), p. 68, fig. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. S. JAKOBIELSKI, "Old Dongola Excavations, 1998", *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* X (1999), pp. 144-145; S. JAKOBIELSKI, "35 Years of Polish Excavations at Old Dongola. A Factfile", in *Dongola-Studien* (Warsaw, 2001), p. 46 & pl. LXIV, 4; J.R. ANDERSON, "Plaque with a representation of a warrior saint", in *Sudan Ancient Treasures* (London, 2004), p. 219 & fig. 190.

indicating that they were “meant to be inlaid into some sort of background”.<sup>19</sup>

In any case, this group of wooden plaques seems quite homogenous and that led Godlewski to suggest that they were the product of a workshop in Nobadia, active around the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>20</sup> One of the plaques found at Qasr Ibrim, however, has been recently re-dated to the Classic Christian period (that means before the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE) on the basis of its archaeological context (an undisturbed burial).<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, the archaeological context of the plaque with the warrior from Attiri expands the other end of the chronological horizon of this special category of Nubian artistic creations, at least to what concerns their use. A closer study of the inscription that covers almost the entire back surface of that object will nuance the topic further.

---

<sup>19</sup> S. WENIG, *Africa in Antiquity vol. II*, p. 324, quoting Mills who referred to the plaque representing the warrior. For the other two, I am based on personal observation during works conducted in the Sudan National Museum in 2006-2008.

<sup>20</sup> W. GODLEWSKI, “Christian Nubia – after the Nubian Campaign”, *Cahier de Recherches de l’Institut de Papyrologie et d’Égyptologie de Lille* 17/1 (1994), p. 272.

<sup>21</sup> W.Y. ADAMS & N. ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim*, pp. 195 & 199, fig. 51 & Pl. 38a & 38c.





Photographs by Alexander Tsakos

#### 16-J-6/45 or SNM 20719

These are the registration numbers from Mills' excavation records and the Khartoum Museum registers respectively for a small wooden plaque of 22 cm of maximum height by 10 cm of maximum width. Its outline follows the contours of the figures represented on one side of the plaque, but the excavator of the site of Attiri suggested that at some point the plaque was broken off on its left side.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> S. WENIG, *Africa in Antiquity* vol. II, p. 324.

There are three figures represented on the front side of the plaque: a crowned warrior standing in front of his horse (himself in frontal position, his horse facing right) in full armor, his coat adorned with a cross over the chest, his cloak seemingly blown by the wind, carrying a shield on his back, holding in the sheath his long sword pointing downwards to a lying figure, of which only the upper half is shown pierced by the warrior's spear through the abdominal region. The very skillful and detailed carving is a bit more rustic when it comes to the facial characteristics of the warrior, who nevertheless appears very tense and either aggressive or mournful. The whole plaque was either left uncolored, or any possible traces of color have now been lost, and the surface has just a brown wooden texture.<sup>23</sup>

The other side is mostly flat and a carved inscription, preserved almost completely, covers the entire surface. The epigraphic field is only interrupted by the aforementioned strip of wood as well as by a hole in the space between the legs and the sword of the main figure. On the right side of that strip of wood, below line 7, the text is illegible. This might compromise the idea of the excavator that the inscription was carved after the breakoff occurred, because then it would be possible to explain the illegibility of the text by some loss of letters that were on the piece of wood that was broken off. However, the difficulties with deciphering parts of the

---

<sup>23</sup> Representations of warriors killing trodden figures are very common from ancient times through the entire medieval period (cfr. R. TURCAN, *Les cultes orientaux dans l'empire romain* [Paris, 1989], especially pp. 244-249; S. LEWIS, "The Iconography of the Coptic Horseman in Byzantine Egypt", *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 10 (1973), pp. 27-63; C. WALTER, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* [Aldershot, 2003]). However, they are more commonly depicted riding their mounts and not aside or in front of them, as is the case with the plaque from Attiri. The iconographic analysis of the wooden plaque cannot be part of the present paper. Suffice it to say here that there are numerous representations of warrior saints in the rich iconographic repertory of mural decoration discovered in the churches of Medieval Nubia. These can appear both standing and riding. The iconographic information derives from a cooperation of mine with Dr. Dobrochna ZIELIŃSKA in a project titled "Corpus of Wall Paintings from Medieval Nubia". Discussing the wooden plaque from Attiri with Zielińska has helped me improve various points in the final form of the paper.

text may rather be due on the one hand to the erosion of the surface, and on the other hand to the state of knowledge of how the Old Nubian language developed in the later stages of the Christian Nubian civilization. In any case, the inscription reads as follows:<sup>24</sup>

	+ Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΕΠΙ	ΜΑ
	ΧΟΣ ΜΑΡΤ (ΥC)	ΤΟΥ
3	Κ(ΥΡΙ)Ε Ι(ΗCΟ)Υ Χ(ΡΙCΤ)Ε ΦΥΛ(ΑΞΟΝ)	ΚΕ
	ΒΟ<Η>ΘΗCΟΝ	ΟΝΤ (Α)
	ΚΥ' Π' ΕΝΔ(ΟΞΟΝ)	CΥΝ
6	ΠΠΟΝ ΠΙ	ΚΑ
	ΦΥΛ (ΑΞΟΝ) ΟΔΩΝ	ΠΟ
	ΚΑΜ ΚΑΘ' Ε'	Φ
9	ΦΥΛ(ΑΞΟΝ) ΠΟΛΕΜ (ΙΩΝ)	Φ
	ΕΠΙΜ<Α>ΧΟΣ	Α
	ΟΥΚΡΕ	Λ
12	ΑΝΟCΑΤ	Τ
	(gap of ca. two lines)	
15	ΤΟΝ Δ(ΟΥΛΟΝ)	
	Ι(ΗCΟΥ)C	

<sup>24</sup> The reconstruction of the text was discussed with Dr. Grzegorz Ochala who improved the reading of lines 4 and 15. He also suggested the variant reading of the word in line 11 and was very helpful in making me improve the argumentation for various other points in the discussion of the object. Finally, I also owe to him the last reference of note 16.

1. 2     $\overline{\text{MAP}}' \text{T}'$  for  $\overline{\text{MAPTYC}}$
1. 3     $\overline{\text{KE}} \quad \overline{\text{IY}} \quad \overline{\text{XE}}$  for  $\overline{\text{KYPIE}} \quad \overline{\text{IHCOY}} \quad \overline{\text{XPICTE}}$ ;  $\phi\gamma'\lambda'$  for  $\phi\gamma\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\text{ON}$
1. 4     $\text{ON}' \text{T}'$  for  $\text{ONTA}$
1. 5     $\text{EN}' \text{A}'$  for  $\text{ENAOZON}$
1. 7     $\phi\gamma'\lambda'$  for  $\phi\gamma\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\text{ON}$
1. 9     $\phi\gamma'\lambda'$  for  $\phi\gamma\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\text{ON}$ ;  $\text{POLE}' \text{M}'$  for  $\text{POLEMIWN}$
1. 15    $\text{TON}' \text{A}'$  for  $\text{TON AOYALON}$
1. 16    $\overline{\text{IC}}$  for  $\overline{\text{IHCOYC}}$
- 
1. 3     $\text{KE}$  for  $\text{KAI}$ .
1. 5     $\text{KY}' \text{PI}'$  is an unresolved abbreviation and therefore it remains impossible for the time being to define the  $\text{KY}' \text{PI}' \quad \text{EN}' \text{A}'$  to whom the first call for protection is addressed; it is also uncertain whether one should read  $\text{CYN}$  or  $\text{CY}$ , which again perplexes the object of the verb  $\phi\gamma\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\text{ON KE BOHONCON}$  in lines 3 and 4.
1. 7-8   It is uncertain whether the reading  $\text{POKAM}$  is correct, since it gives no obvious meaning, but it may be a toponym; or whether the letters in the two lines belong to different words. In that case, perhaps  $\text{KAM}$  in l. 8 is the Old Nubian word for camel.
1. 8     $\text{KA}\theta'\epsilon'$  may be an abbreviation for the pronoun  $\text{KA}\theta\epsilon\text{IC}$  /  $\text{KA}\theta\epsilon\text{EN}$ , but only if the uncertain reading of the raised  $\epsilon$  is correct. The three letters  $\text{KA}\theta$ , though, give no obvious meaning; in that case, the word may be related to the hypothetical toponym suggested right above; or the correct transcription is  $\text{KA}\sigma$ , which is the Old Nubian word for “donkey” and this would fit nicely with the alternative reading for  $\text{KAM}$  (“camel”), suggested for the word before. The  $\phi$  on the right hand side makes no sense in

combination either with these readings of  $\kappa\lambda\theta$  /  $\kappa\lambda\delta$  or in connection to the word starting in line 9 ( $\phi\gamma'\lambda'$ ). Since the same goes for the  $\phi$  on the right hand side of line 9 too, perhaps they belong to a vertically written word/phrase that would start from the letters  $\pi\theta$  in line 7 and include all the letters on the right hand side of the text until line 12. However, the legible letters form a word  $\pi\theta\phi\phi\lambda\lambda\tau$ , which makes no sense either.

- l. 11  $\omicron\gamma\kappa\rho\epsilon$  could be a variant for  $\omicron\gamma\kappa\omicron\gamma\rho$  meaning day; or it should be transcribed  $\omicron\gamma\iota\epsilon$ , which could be a variant of  $\omicron\gamma\epsilon\iota\sigma$  meaning star. In either case, it is tempting to see the  $\lambda$  in the right end as the subject marker of the noun.
- l. 12  $\lambda\theta\omicron\varsigma\alpha\tau$  or  $\lambda\eta\alpha\varsigma\alpha\tau$  like the Old Nubian  $\lambda\eta\iota\varsigma\iota\tau$  meaning resurrection.

#### Translation (tentative)

“Saint Epimachos, martyr of the Lord Jesus the Christ, protect and help the one who is the glorious  $\kappa\gamma\pi'$  to win with (his/your?) horse ... protect the roads ... (with) camels and donkeys (?) ... protect from the enemies... Epimachos ... for/to the servant of Jesus ...”

#### Discussion

The gap in the first 12 lines represents that projecting stripe of wood. Moreover, after line 7, the text on the right hand side does not seem to be related to the text on the left hand side; thus, either it functions vertically or it is a sampling of individual letters. The erosion of the surface renders a complete reading of the inscription almost impossible. What is more, it is especially due to the particularities of the language used that the precise meaning of the text remains very difficult to decipher.

All earlier commentators of the plaque suggested that the inscription is in Greek. This suggestion may be partly confirmed by the reading of the

first seven lines, but it becomes rather dubious for lines 8, 11, and 12. There, the wording does not conform to the Greek vocabulary; it may find parallels, though, in the Old Nubian language, although nothing can be ascertained, as can be seen by the transcription and the commentary (see above). Until further studies in Old Nubian and/or the application of new techniques for the reading of such eroded epigraphic fields take place (e.g. infrared or ultraviolet photography, polynomial texture mapping etc.<sup>25</sup>), the inscription under scrutiny should be considered as an original creation of a Nubian scribe who combined formulaic expressions in Greek with text in his native language.

The type of the text inscribed, however, seems easier to discern – at first in any case. It is a prayer to the martyr Saint Epimachos, asking for intervention for the protection of a person or a locality not securely identified in the parts of the text deciphered (see, however, the commentary of lines 7-8 above). The urgency of the prayer is exemplified by the triple repetition of the call for protection (ΦΥΛΑΞΟΝ in lines 3, 7, and 9). Nevertheless, the first instance of this verb in the inscription differs from the other two both because it is followed by the verb ΒΟΗΘΗΣΟΝ, and because it is uncertain who the prayer's addressee is. This uncertainty arises from the mixture of the genitive and the vocative cases in the reference to "Lord Jesus the Christ" in line 3. Although at first it seems as though the entire phrase functions as a genitive defining for whom Epimachos had martyred (especially given the use of the definite article ΤΟΥ in line 2), the choice of a vocative in combination with the use of the imperatives ΦΥΛΑΞΟΝ and ΒΟΗΘΗΣΟΝ makes one wonder whether this call is actually addressed to Jesus rather than to Epimachos. If this

---

<sup>25</sup> During working at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago for the publication of the epigraphic material from Qasr el Wizz and Serra East, in September 2011, I was introduced to the polynomial texture mapping, which is a technique of imaging and interactively displaying objects under varying lighting conditions to reveal surface phenomena. The technique is used in Chicago by the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/pfa/>.

interpretation is correct, then the  $\kappa\gamma' \pi' \epsilon\eta' \alpha'$  is none other than Epimachos, and the reference to the victorious horse and rider that follows in lines 5 and 6 are references to the Saint himself. Such a reconstruction would be evocative of the way the Nubians might have understood the “channeling” of divine help through the venerated saints to their own earthly reality: First, Jesus the Christ is asked to protect the saintly figure (lines 3-4); then, the saint himself is asked to help in the realm that he is most efficient and/or needed; in the case of Epimachos, to stand guard over the roads and to protect the area from all enemies (lines 7 and 9).

However, this reconstruction might be erroneous, in which case all three calls for protection are addressed to Epimachos and the  $\kappa\gamma' \pi' \epsilon\eta' \alpha'$  is a human. In this alternative, the plausible reference to a servant of Jesus in the last two preserved lines of the inscription (lines 15 and 16) might refer to that same man. He should then be understood as a member of the Christian Nubian community of Attiri, an important figure among his peers, possibly mounted warriors, but also a pious Christian, subduing himself and setting his military achievements under the auspices of the Lord Jesus the Christ and his martyr, Saint Epimachos.

In any case, it remains an open question why it was specifically the martyr Epimachos who was attributed the protective qualities of a warrior saint. It is generally accepted that the saint venerated in Nubia by that name is Epimachos of Pelusium.<sup>26</sup> The contradiction that Epimachos of Pelusium was not a professional soldier<sup>27</sup> can be countered by the fact that Patriarch Eutychius included martyr Epimachos in a list of other holy figures that martyred under Diocletian and Maximian, like George or Mercurius, who were normally represented as warrior saints.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. J. VAN DER VLIET, *Catalogue of the Coptic Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum*, OLA 121, (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA, 2003), no. 24, pp. 84-85.

<sup>27</sup> For Epimachos in general, cfr. D. L. O'LEARY, *The Saints of Egypt* (Amsterdam, 1974), p. 131 & M. VAN ESBROECK, “Epimachus of Pelusium, Saint”, CE, III, pp. 965-967.

<sup>28</sup> L. CHEIKHO (ed.), *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales*, CSCO 50 (Beirut, 1906), p. 16.

identification of this specific martyr with a warrior saint appears in the archaeological record as a genuinely Nubian tradition that was quite popular in the Middle Nile Valley as attested from both iconographic and epigraphic evidence. Their examination will lead to interesting conclusions.

### **Epimachus Nubianus**

Starting with the iconographic evidence, there are only two murals from Nubia, which represent Saint Epimachos, and both depict him as a warrior saint:

1. On the western bank of the Nile, at the site of Abdallahi-n Irqi, a legend identifies a mounted saint as Epimachos.<sup>29</sup>
2. On the eastern bank, at the church that occupied the speos of Horemheb at Gebel Adda (Abu Oda), a “figure of a mounted saint spearing the dragon (?)” is accompanied by a legend identifying him with Saint Epimachos. On the basis of this and three more wall inscriptions from the same site (see below), it has been suggested that the church was also dedicated to Saint Epimachos.<sup>30</sup>

Turning to the epigraphic evidence concerning *Epimachus Nubianus*, one notices that it is actually quite rich:<sup>31</sup>

1. There are three inscriptions painted on the walls of the church at Abu Oda.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> P. VAN MOORSEL, J. JACQUET & H. SCHNEIDER, *The Central Church of Abdallah Nirqi* (Leyden, 1975), pp. 123-124. The different orthography of the site's name in the text has been suggested by Adam Łajtar on the basis of the Nubian translation “the land of Abdallah” (cfr. Mokhtar M. KHALIL, *Wörterbuch der nubischen Sprache (Fadidja/Mahas-Dialekt)* (Warsaw, 1996), p. 47: ١٢١ & p. 76: -١١ as Genetivpartikel).

<sup>30</sup> L. GRIFFITH, *The Nubian Texts of the Christian Period* (Berlin, 1913), p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> In this list, I do not include of course a reference to a man named Epimachos, as attested from his funerary stela discovered at Saqinya: T. MINA, *Inscriptions coptes et grecques de Nubie* (Cairo, 1942), no. 186, p. 85.



2. Two fragments of an inscribed basin from Akasha are stored in the Sudan National Museum. They mention Saint Epimachos, and the editor of the Catalogue of the Coptic Inscriptions suggested that this could have been “the name of the church or monastery to which the basin was donated”.<sup>33</sup> This is the southernmost known attestation of the cult of Saint Epimachos.
3. In the category of literary manuscripts from Nubia, three fragments of a martyrdom of Saint Epimachos have been found:
  - a. A parchment fragment from Faras with an Old Nubian version of the martyrdom.<sup>34</sup>
  - b. Two more parchment fragments with the same (?) Old Nubian version of the martyrdom, kept at the Coptic Museum of Cairo, where they are registered as found at Qasr Ibrim.<sup>35</sup>

Neither (a) nor (b) seem to have any parallels among the known corpus of martyrdoms for Saint Epimachos in either Greek or Coptic; and neither the Old Nubian nor the Coptic nor the Greek martyrdoms can help reconstitute more precisely the text of the inscription on the wooden plaque from Attiri.

4. In documentary manuscripts, there are three references to a church dedicated to Saint Epimachos, all at Qasr Ibrim:
  - c. A church at Ibrim West is the focal point in a Royal Proclamation in Old Nubian.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> See note 31.

<sup>33</sup> J. VAN DER VLIET, *Catalogue*, no. 24, pp. 84-85.

<sup>34</sup> G.M. BROWNE, “An Old Nubian Version of the Martyrdom of Saint Epimachus”, in *50 Years of Polish Excavations in Egypt and the Near East: Acts of the Symposium at the Warsaw University, 1986* (Warsaw, 1992), pp. 74-7.

<sup>35</sup> G.M. BROWNE, “An Old Nubian translation of the Martyrdom of Saint Epimachus”, *Le Muséon* 115 (2002), pp. 69-76.

<sup>36</sup> G.M. BROWNE, *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim*, vol. III (London, 1991), text 30: pp. 3-4 & 39-40 & Plate I.

- d. A second reference to an Epimachos church at Ibrim is included in a sale of land for a church.<sup>37</sup>
- e. And a third one is contained in a letter from an *elder* to a *domesticus*.<sup>38</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain whether all the references concern the same church, but its importance in at least the southern part of Lower Nubia is confirmed. Moreover, Saint Epimachos is described in the Royal Proclamation as a protector of “the four corners of the nation”. This parallels nicely with the role attributed to Epimachos in the text from Attiri, where he is the protector of the roads leading to a given locality, possibly Attiri itself. In the Royal Proclamation, he is also described holding a spear with which he can stub all the enemies of the kingdom until the point that “on the day of judgment he comes great in battle against them”. This is also a very close parallel to both the iconography of the plaque from Attiri, where Epimachos uses his spear to kill the lying figure, and the inscription with its clear invocation for protection from enemies.

Last but not least, concerning the dates of the epigraphic evidence, it is only the Royal Proclamation and the sale of land that are securely dated: to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1156 and to the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 1200 respectively. These two dated documents may lead us to the suggestion that the cult of Saint Epimachos was also prevalent in Late Christian Nubia.

### Conclusions

The references to the roads/corners of the kingdom, in relation to the warrior/rider saints who were expected/depicted to be victorious against the enemy, could be read in the context of the social and military reality of Late Christian Nubia, when the threat of foreign invasions was eminent and constant. In fact, this fits very well with the suggested dates for at least some of the wooden plaques of Nubia in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Especially

---

<sup>37</sup> G.M. BROWNE, *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim*, text 40: pp. 20-21 & 59-61.

<sup>38</sup> G.M. BROWNE, *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim*, text 53: pp. 30 & 70 & Plate 6 (top).

from the last third of the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Nubia was under attack from the north, first by the Ayyubids and then, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, by the Mameluks. During that period, the saints venerated in Nubia, like Epimachos, must have played an important role of moral support for the real guarantors of the military protection of the Christian communities along the Middle Nile Valley against invading enemies. These communities might have used mounted guards in reality, but they could surely have survived only in naturally protected areas, like Attiri.

It is perhaps the case that Epimachos was linked at some point in the history of Christian Nubia with the protection of the borders of the territory under the authority of a Christian Nubian ruler, as it is suggested in the Royal Proclamation from Qasr Ibrim. Then, the finding of the plaque inscribed with a prayer to protect a realm, which was linked with the site of Attiri indicates, in my opinion, a rather late stage in the disintegration of the Christian states ruling parts of the Middle Nile Valley. Thus, the inscription on the back of the object discussed in this short paper could be dated in the last three centuries (12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) of the Christian Nubian civilization and be understood as a token of this civilization surviving in the emerging post-Medieval world of the Middle Nile Valley. Such tokens of Nubian identity have become important for the Nubians in the modern Sudanese state, since they are threatened both by the prohibition of being taught their history and language and by the government's plans to construct new dams on the Cataracts of the Middle Nile Valley.<sup>39</sup>

Recibido / Received: 29/11/2011

Informado / Reported: 07/02/2012

Aceptado / Accepted: 03/04/2012

---

<sup>39</sup> For the language issue, cfr. [www.rescuenubia.org](http://www.rescuenubia.org); for the dams issue, cfr. H. HAFSAAS-TSAKOS, "Ethical implications of salvage archaeology and dam building: The clash between archaeologists and local people in Dar al-Manasir, Sudan", *Journal of Social Archaeology* 11/1 (2011), pp. 49-76.